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“NICHT MEHR TRISTAN”

By B. M. STEIGMAN

PHONOGRAPHED music is an eminently suitable objective for the smiter of Philistines and the slayer of them with great slaughter. For one thing, its devotees are so many that the warrior has cause enough to appeal for Jehovah's thunder against them. Then it proceeds from a mechanical contraption, hateful, accordingly, in the ears of the true believer. More than that, it has become commercialized, and with amazing success. It is therefore unmistakably a contrivance of the Children of Darkness. It is an institution, an automaton, banal, crude, lifeless, soulless!

It is or it isn't art. Its present significance only the deaf could deny. That the mechanical contraption eliminates time and space as obstacles to the hearing of good singing and playing may have far-reaching effects. It is because music more than any other of the dynamic arts is actually only of that point of time we mean by the present, that so much popular misunderstanding as to its "meaning" exists. The interpretative faculty is given scant footing. The phonograph, however imperfectly, does fix performed music for further observation. This leads to understanding, which presently becomes critical. The opera record gives a relentless exposition of what might otherwise have escaped unnoticed.

Now it is not at all unlikely that one of the first results will be the insistence upon operatic sense as well as sound. The words may have to pass muster. Of all the wonders about the opera the strangest is the complacent acceptance of the unbelievable drivel that is the general text. The sharpest theatre-goer, who, if the same crude and absurdly colored bait were laid for him in a play, would utterly condemn it, swallows the whole affair at the opera-house and even believes he has partaken of a rare feast. What matters the story or the language? Who insists upon such extraneous matter cannot possibly care for opera. The passionate lover of music should be blind and deaf to the impenetrable stupidity, the wizened and painted gaudiness, the idiotic prancing and sputtering and fuming, of his beloved. The closer view and

hearing of what it really is may bring him to his senses. The phonograph may help to dispel the enchantment which the distant stage has lent.

The foreign language is something of a refuge. For nonsense appears blatantly exposed only when it stands in the vernacular. The alien tongue is more merciful, for to most of us it is not altogether transparent. The fonder the lover of grand opera, the more reluctant, it would seem, should he be to have it translated. In English, to be sure, it is all arrant rot; but, look you, such may be the thoughts and feelings far away where there are Cannibals that each other eat, the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders. They perhaps do express themselves in just such bombast and are naturally given to the maudlin and tawdry.

Such considerations may have had little to do with it;—it may have been only the natural inertia of the opera companies that until the outbreak of the war preserved most opera and music drama in the original. The force that overcame all doubt and inertia was the force that in 1918 preserved civilization on the fields of France. Yet it was not at all spent in the performance. It carried on where there could not possibly be any need for it. It struck with particular violence—of all things—the music drama; the activity than which there is none at a further remove from the daily activities. We might as well have sent an expeditionary force into Arimaspa or Xanadu. It must be admitted that it was the simplest way of showing resentment against the German language. It required merely a negative insistence, preferable certainly to a positive abolition of the German press or to a carting forth and burning of a hundred thousand German books. Beside this, the banishment of Wagner was much easier to effect, much easier, peradventure, to endure.

And then after a decent interval of time he may be restored. But he must first turn English. Considering it all, it may be an unconscious tribute to the poet. We have with charity aforethought forborne from insisting upon translations of French and Italian opera. We recognize in Wagner's dramas truly noble poetry such as may well grace our tongue. We find them staged sensibly in Monsalvat, in Nibelheim, at the bottom of the Rhine-maidens' Rhine, at the top of the Valkyries' mountains, where poetic rapture is more likely than, say, in Violetta's drawing-room in Paris or in the real home for boys in the Golden West. We find them, moreover, set to music that is of acknowledged greatness. The combination, we feel, may bear the closest scrutiny. Fix it

for the ear by phonographing it and it will remain music and poetry. Well, that ought certainly to stand translation.

But the tribute which the general demand for Wagner in English implies turns into grotesque insult when this is carried into effect. The sound and sense and spirit of the new words will no longer fit. They bulge here and strain there and are warped and awry nearly all over. The general form, fixed by the music, remains the same. The poetry it is meant to grace is a dead and senseless weight.

If it were only possible to submit proof—phonographic proof that could be considered leisurely—of how it would turn out, there might be less enthusiastic subscribing to the ugly perpetration. Only a partial representation, the graphic, the black and white, is possible. It is at least indicative. As it is the more so, the greater the beauty of the original, the proof here submitted is of “Tristan und Isolde.”

That of all incredible nonsense that is called translation of this music drama the Corders’ is the generally used English libretto, is evidence of how operative is the accepted regard for the text. The libretto is usually anonymous, a saving indication of sense by the authors. Here is a sample from the opening scene:

BRANGÄNE:

Dem Wunder aller Reiche,
dem hochgepries’nen Mann,
dem Helden ohne Gleiche,
des Ruhmes Hort und Bann?

ISOLDE:

Der zagend vor dem Streiche
sich flüchtet wo er kann,
weil eine Braut er als Leiche
für seinen Herrn gewann!—
Dünkt es dich dunkel,
mein Gedicht?

BRANGÄNE:

Extolled by ev’ry nation,
his happy country’s pride,
the hero of creation,—
whose fame so high and wide?

ISOLDE:

In shrinking trepidation
his shame he seeks to hide,
while to the king, his relation,
he brings the corpse-like bride!—
Seems it so senseless
what I say?

Well, let the reader judge.

Tolerable poetry is perhaps the hardest to stomach. We spew the lukewarm concoction out of our mouths. The Corders are noteworthy at least in that their banality holds the reader’s attention. There is nothing mediocre about it. At times it is so pronounced as to be quite impressive. The interpretation of the meeting of the lovers is an example. Possibly the pace of the English text is set by the customary antics on the stage of Tristan and Isolde immediately after drinking the love potion. The two score bars or so that it takes to get the lovers started is used by the singers according to tradition for muscular activity familiar on

the baseball field as incidental to the pitchers' warming up. When at last they do go to it their speed and control are relentless:

Ohne Gleiche!
Überreiche!
Überselig!
Ewig! Ewig!

Endless pleasure!
Boundless treasure!
Ne'er to sever!
Never! Never!

As the poetic rapture of the second act rises, the Corder translation begins to froth and rave. The reader will hardly believe that the following, for example, is the accepted version of part of the duet, reprinted from the standard libretto:

Barg im Busen
uns sich die Sonne,
leuchten lachend
Sterne der Wonne.
Von deinem Zauber
sanft umspinnen,
vor deinen Augen
süss zerrennen,
Herz an Herz dir,
Mund an Mund,
Eines Athems
ein'ger Bund;—

Hid our hearts away
sunlight's streaming,
bliss would bloom
from stars' tender beaming.
To thy enchantment
we surrender
beneath thy gaze
so wondrous tender;
heart to heart
and lip to lip,
each the other's
breath we sip. Etc.

Further quotation might be spared. But it is not only from the fury of the existing translations that the good Lord is to deliver us, but from threatened further barbarous invasions. Which to prevent, the terrifying record of those who in the past have sought to effect anything like a landing, is herewith dutifully exposed.

To the natural difficulties which the unfortunate translator encountered in the German sentence structure, transposed as it is beyond the limits of our widest poetic license, must be added such cramping requirements as rhyme, which produced distortions such as "When in the sick man's keen blade she perceived a notch had been made"; and alliteration, responsible for monstrosities like "Blood-guilt gets between us," "Blissful beams our eyes are binding." Then there are many abstract terms, especially those that have distinct Wagnerian connotation, that cannot possibly be translated. "Wahn" is not "folly" (the Corders turned "Welcher Wahn" into "What a whim!"), nor is "Lust" the same as "bliss." "In (Isolden) selig nicht ganz verging" is supposed to mean "not sink at once into bondage blest."

The greatest obstacle is, of course, the fixed melody, not of the larger, simpler and more obvious "dance-form," as Wagner names it, into which a stanza or whole verse paragraph may be

made to fit, regardless of the position of individual words or even lines, but melody that is an intense and beautiful reading of the poem. Precise textual equivalence is hardly ever possible. And even slight transpositions result in utterly meaningless singing. Thus, “er sah mir in die Augen,” the last word of which is linked with the corresponding motif, becomes “his eyes on mine were fastened,” to which the music is quite unrelated. “Das Schwert—ich liess es fallen” is turned into “The sword—dropped from my fingers,” in which the fine repression and suspense of the pauses after “ich” and after “liess” are lost by the anteposition of “dropped,” and the following words made merely redundant. “Mit dem Blick mich nicht mehr beschwere!” where the significance of text and music depends on the word “Blick,” is in Corder English “my emotion then might be ended,” with its equivalent of the inane syllable “mo.” Isolde’s unspeakable contempt “für Kornwalls müden König” is absurdly made a geographic aversion: “for Mark, the *Cornish* monarch.”

The page from which these examples are taken is representative of the whole work. There is hardly a passage but has its shortcomings. And every now and then these wax into truly monumental lapses, like Isolde’s puzzling

Wie das Herz ihm
muthig schwilt,
voll und hehr
im Busen quillt:

How his heart
with lion zest
calmly happy
beats in his breast.

and Marke’s shocking

“Why in hell must I bide” . . .

Why, indeed!—

In the preface to his translation Jackson attempts to indicate the climactic effectiveness of the drama by quotations such as: “The waves of melody rise higher and higher, as if the distant portals of heaven opened to the vibrations of two hearts.”—The most curious of literary illusions certainly must be his who imitates a high winged flight by flapping his blunt feathers and believes the windy disturbance he makes indicative of altitude and speed. The prefatory dizziness is felt throughout the work.

O blinde Augen!
Blöde Herzen!
Zahmer Muth,
verzagtes Schweigen!

O branded blindness!
Heart’s ensnaring,
Daunted daring’s
Silence despairing!

Jackson's diction is noteworthy. Tristan considers the potion "heart enmaddening," Isolde calls him her "faithless enfolder," and while Brangäne is "blooming and wailing to heaven," the two lovers are in chewing-gum rapture over their "luscious delights." The translator throughout shows vast range, now gushing forth that

des Quelles sanft
rieselnde Welle
rauscht so wonnig daher;

The purling fount's
Rippling current
Murmurs so merrily on,

now in a business-like manner begging to state that

Dein Loos nun selber
magst du dir sagen:

Thy fate had truly
Been settled duly.

The Earl of Roscommon's rule for translators is never forgotten: "Tho' gross innumerable Faults abound, in spite of nonsense, never fail of sound."

Of regard for the music there is probably less here than in any other translation meant to be sung. Even outstanding conformity is ignored. Brangäne's "was dich quält," with its implication both by voice and orchestra of the key motif of the play, is made meaningless by "to me confess." "Der Wunde, die ihn plagte," with its continuous suffering in chromatic descents, is in fine musical and dramatic contrast to the following line, "getreulich pflag sie da"; and the effect is destroyed by singing both ideas in the first line: "She healed the wounds that pained him," and then adding, as Jackson seems to have a mania for doing, trite and irrelevant details: "And watched him night and day." Similar ruinous treatment is accorded the admirable setting of "das Schwert—ich liess es fallen!": "It fell—for thee alone meant." The absurdity to which this indifference to the music led him is well exemplified by his disregard of the four bars that separate Brangäne's reply to Isolde's request for the casket—a passage necessary dramatically for Brangäne to cross the stage to fetch the casket, and musically to develop the phrase associated with it—from her exposition of its contents. Jackson's sentence is left dangling, broken in two by the passage.

With a parting mention of the Beckmesser versification ("Be'fore the sun shall set"; "whatever Y'solde com'mand," etc.) and the distortions that they produce, such as "No insult such would twice to give they desire to" and "In custom search" ("Fragt die Sitte")—this chamber of "Tristan" horrors has received sufficient notice. We pass to Exhibit C, the Chapman version.

The inevitable crippled and club-footed lines are here, too, in abundance. Especially cruel is the constant dismemberment of the text, sentences and phrases being ruthlessly lopped off where the music and the drama call for a pause. Specimen: “dem Eigenholde” (rest): “forthwith be told, he”; “nun höre” (rest): “now hear what”; “Und warb er Marke” (rest): “and if to Mark he.” The exigencies of rhyme make it necessary for Isolde to “mend” Tristan; of alliteration, to “waken the deep and the growl of its greed”; of stanzaic conformity, “from this wonder, sun to sunder.”

The text has in general the usual defects. There is such senseless translation as that of “Welcher Wahn” into “This is false,” “Hart am Ziel” into “Right at land,” “Liebeswonne” into “Love and passion.” “Diess wundervolle Weib” becomes “This wondrous fair, a wife”; “Sehnsucht Noth” is “wistful pain”; “Isolde lebt und wacht” means “Isolde lives aright.” The significance of “Urvergessen” is “out of thinking.” The music becomes often meaningless, as when Isolde’s scornful reference to the king, “Stehen wir vor König Marke,” is turned into “We shall ere long be standing”; or, when orchestra and voice suggest “Laubes säuselnd Getön,” the words are: “(by) branches art thou misled.” Nor are there lacking such special features as Tristan’s suspicious account of how he obtained that powerful drink. Somebody “slipped it” to him, he says, and he goes on to relate how “filled with rapture” he “sipped it.” Isolde, as befits a lady, takes it of course only for her health. “This draught will do me good,” she says.

The Jameson translation clutches fearfully to the original. It aims at perfect word and even phrase equivalence and does succeed better than any other. But it follows that much of it is utterly unidiomatic, and some of it even absurd. The disregard for rhyme and alliteration is conducive to exactness; but the removal of such restraints makes the poetic rapture of the drama fly outward into apparently irrelevant directions. Unrhymed lyric expression that can give the engraved effect of the rhymed (as Tennyson’s “Tears, idle tears” does) is rare. The ordinary attempts sprawl. Jameson at best writes prose. At worst his accurate following of the German leads to such constructions as “No day nor morrow” (“Nicht heut’ noch morgen”) or “True be to me?” (“Bist du mir treu?”); or to such felicities as “this peerless first of heroes” and “he looked beneath my eyelids.”

Forman’s translation is certainly not prose. If eight pages of appendix press notices (quoting among others Swinburne and Watts-Dunton) can establish anything, it ought to be magnificent

poetry. It is presumably the best that has been done by way of "Tristan" translation, and is therefore the most illuminating. It permits of judgment of a product finished in conformance with the Wagnerian requirements. It follows carefully, as the title-page promises, the mixed alliterative and rhyming metres of the original. It is not intended, however, says the author, "to be taken in strict and continuous company with the music," and he has "not considered it necessary to print the numerous alternative readings which would be requisite for such a purpose." Whereby is implied that the alternative lines are more singable than readable. It would be rather interesting, considering the "readable" text, to see those alternative lines which have been kept prudently out of print. They baffle speculation of possibilities in grotesque.

For the printed version is as fantastically puffed up a piece of writing as the affliction of "style" has ever produced. It is really astonishing that anyone of our own age should care to accept the tinsel legacies that were Euphues'. But here they are, jacked up on impossible stilts, those mechanical contrivances of elaborate indirectness and far-fetched phraseology, that dreary parade of senseless sound. And it has not even the occasional glib cleverness and fancy that some of the anatomists of wit attained. It is altogether ridiculous. "Let laughter," says Isolde when she extinguishes the torch, "let laughter as I slake it, be the sound!" And surely no audience will disappoint her when the next thing heard is

ISOLDE: Treuloser Holder!

TRISTAN: Seligste Frau!

.

BEIDE: Wie sich die Herzen ·
wogend erheben,
wie alle Sinne
wonnig erbeben!
Sehnender Minne
schwellendes Blühen,
schmachtender Liebe
seliges Glühen!
Jach in der Brust
jauchzende Lust!

ISOLDE: Faithlessly fondest!

TRISTAN: Deathlessly dearest!

.

BOTH: Seas in our hearts
to billows are shaken!
My mind in a tempest
of madness is taken!
Lifts me the surge
of a sense beyond name!
Fills me a goading,
gladdening flame!
My bosom the bliss
can bear not of this!

Provided the audience hears it. Typographically it is certainly no more preposterous than phonographically. Whether they be read or sung, such phenomena must be encountered as "hope of hap," "unshuddering ship," "for baneful draught its backward bane." Tristan is here a "bride-beseecher," "in truth the most unturning." The alliterative orgy makes the lines stagger ("From

him back you will hear,” “me thou wouldst linger not nigh to”) and hiccup (“He prated at lip,” “The sword—I downward sank it”), and go off into besotted gibberish (“A scorn that scarred her land,” “who Isold’ could see and in Isold’ not madden to melt his soul”). Which suggests the literal subject-matter of Tristan’s reference—irreverent and unconstitutional though it be—to that accursed drink “whose foam with bliss I sipped and swallowed.”

If a final demonstration were needed of what Wagner is like in English it is furnished by Le Gallienne. His “Tristan” is unrestrained by any consideration for the music or the original metre, rhyme, and alliteration. The freedom thereby gained should be promising. Yet the product is very tame indeed. It is sometimes incorrect as translation, often slipshod, rather wearisome throughout. Illustrative passages might be taken almost at random; but Wagner translations probably the reader’s bosom “more can bear not of this.”

An interesting sidelight upon the subject is cast by Oliver Huckel’s effort to translate into narrative blank verse both the words and the action of the music drama. For though his muse, certainly unlike Le Gallienne’s, is one of raven hair and ruby lips, his version is the more readable. But only when Wagner is lost sight of altogether, as in “Tristram of Lyonesse,” is English poetry evidently possible.

Mention should be made of Mr. Krehbiel’s new translation of the “Liebestod,” which has been sung at several orchestral concerts. It is a faithful enough version, but there is nothing about it to modify the conclusions already drawn. It is better than the Corders’ cabaret finale of “sinking, be drinking, in a kiss, highest bliss.” And yet, more than such damning praise can hardly be given “immerse me, disperse me, wittingless find sweet bliss.” “Immerse” and “disperse” have none of the connection and sequence that “ertrinken” and “versinken” have, except the rhyme. And “wittingless” is a brainless bauble-intrusion of the kin of Wamba, serf of Cedric the Saxon.

Reference has already been made to the suggestion that the dramas be translated into French. The difficulties, however, would be similar. Besides which, the spirit of French, its genius, or whatever it is that gives any language atmosphere, is more alien even than that of English. The theme of “Tristan und Isolde,” as conceived by Wagner, is especially beyond French expression. The translation becomes sharp, polished, pretty, at times even flippant. Such impression has not merely a surface origin in yellow paper covered books. It goes deeper. In considering a language,

the style is the people. The emotions of Wagner's "Tristan" are not of the French. Taine is enlightening:

The bent of the French character makes of love not a passion but a gay banquet, tastefully arranged, in which the service is elegant, the food exquisite, the silver brilliant, the two guests in full dress, in good humor, quick to anticipate and please each other, knowing how to keep up the gayety, and when to part.

Of the five French versions, that of Le Comte de Chambrun is admittedly unsingable, and that of Wilder has been discarded as impossibly crude and inaccurate. D'Offoël insists that his is for singing only. His excuse accuses: when the words are sung, he says, their imperfections, only too apparent when read, will disappear or at least seem slighter. The implied license enables him to conform fairly well with the music. Lyon's is a linear prose translation, too literal to be idiomatic, poetic, or musically sensible. That of Ernst is the least unsatisfactory. But although his work is sufficiently careful, it is quite impossible to consider it as anything more than a correct French gloss. How disillusioning seems Isolde's Liebestod, how matter of fact, when she can give so precise an account of it as: "Dans la Vie souffle immense du Tout, me perdre, m'éteindre, sans pensée, toute Joie!" That's all. (Lyon's is: "Me nouer, Disparaître, Inconsciente, Suprême volupté!" D'Offoël's: "se perdre, se fondre, sans pensée, ô bonheur!") The dramatic concepts lose their connotation. "Wahn" becomes either "L'erreur" or "Aveugle"; "göttlich ew'ges Ur-Vergessen" in Lyon's translation is "Du divin, éternel, primitif oubli"; in D'Offoël's: "l'oubli divin, total, suprême." Ernst's is "que l'oubli divin sans bornes"; and of "Ich war, wo ich von je gewesen": "J'étais aux sources de mon être." Good enough perhaps as science, but hardly as poetry.

More detailed consideration can profit little. Whether in English or in French a translation can give merely the lifeless substance of what in the original is the greatest of music dramas. The characters are mechanical contrivances singing mechanically contrived words. They are not the characters Wagner conceived: "nicht mehr Isolde, nicht mehr Tristan." None of the translations is really deserving of any serious criticism. And their exposition here is in part to indicate to such as may want to venture again upon so arid and waste an undertaking the unhappy fate of those who perished before them. The main concern is of course the suffering that may be inflicted upon the audience. It is sincerely to be hoped that any proposed text will be submitted on the

typograph at least for general inspection before it is made into the great and inflexible, almost permanently fixed, record that is an opera company's performance. What the verdict would be it is fairly safe to foretell. And if the musical setting could be added and we could try out the “record” at close range, there could be no doubt about it.